

# The Buddhist Arguments on the Oneness of Humankind

(Transcribed from Prof. Oliver's Lecture)

## 1. Introduction

In the Buddhist texts, we find the two terms used: **puggalavemattatā** (difference of individuals) and **indriyavemattatā** (difference of faculties)<sup>1</sup>. But, the structure of individual does not differ from another: all are equal in a sense that individuals are **pañcakkhandā** (five aggregates) and **nāmarūpa** (the combination of name and form). Furthermore, **the basic problems** of mankind also are all equal: **dukkha** (the first noble truth). Therefore, **equality between individual (man or woman) is a basic Buddhist teaching** although in a certain aspect (*puggalavemattatā* and *indriyavemattatā*) it accepts the differences of mankind.

## 2. The Seven Basic Arguments

There are seven basic arguments on equality of human being in the Buddhist texts:

- (1) **Biological argument** which is found in the **Vāsetṭha Sutta** (*Majjhimanikāya*, *Suttanipāta*)
- (2) **Anthropological argument** which is found in the **Aggañña Sutta** (*Dīghanikāya*)
- (3) **Social argument** which is found in the **Assalāyana Sutta** (*Majjhimanikāya*)
- (4) **Legal argument** which is found in the **Madhura Sutta** (*Majjhimanikāya*)
- (5) **Moral argument** which is found in the **Madhura Sutta** (*Majjhimanikāya*)
- (6) **Ethical argument** which is found in the **Saniti Sutta** (*Dīghanikāya*)
- (7) **Spiritual argument** which is found in the **Kannakatthalaka Sutta** (*Majjhimanikāya*)

According to these seven arguments, all men are equal by birth.

### (1) Biological Argument

*Vāsetṭha Sutta*<sup>2</sup> was addressed to two young Brahmins who argued each other on the issue of supremacy of Brahmins: one insisted the Brahmin is superior by birth and the other said superior by deed. Then they brought the issue to the Buddha, saying that they had the problem of *jāti-veda* (theory of birth) and would listened to and follow the Buddha's answer. The Buddha replied, "I will explain this to you from the very beginning and as it is." That means he will explain **historically** and **realistically**. Then he said, "I will explain to you the **analysis of species among the living being** (*jātinibhāgaṃ pāṇānaṃ*). There are various species among the living beings. The Buddha categorized them into **seven wider categories**: (a) grass and trees, (b) worms, moths and ants, (c) reptiles and snakes (d) four footed animals, (e) fishes, (f) birds, and (g) human beings.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term **indriya** has two meanings: **sense organs** and **sense of five powers** such as *saddhā* (faith), *vinīya* (energy), *sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom).

<sup>2</sup> This *sutta* is important because it was compiled in both canonical texts of *dīghanikāya* nad *Suttanipāta*. As we know, the ***Suttanipāta*** is the **oldest collection** of the Buddha's discourses.

<sup>3</sup> We can notice that even grass and trees were recognized as living being.

Within each of these major categories there are **sub-species** and each of them is **different from one another**: for example, among the four footed animals, lions different from elephants. Thus each sub-species is different because their characteristics were inherited differently from the birth. This special characteristic inherited by birth was called **jātimayaṃ lingaṃ**. Therefore, thousands of species are different from one another on the basis of *jātimayaṃ lingaṃ*. As far as **human beings** are concerned, however, there is no *jātimayaṃ lingaṃ*. One man (here man conventionally used for both man or woman) is not different from another man because **no one has a special characteristic which is inherited by birth** (*evaṃ natthi manussesu lingaṃ jātimayaṃ puthu*). Therefore, **all men are equal**. This kind of equality is not found among the other species of living beings.

The important thing is that there are people who think that one man is different from the other on certain parts of body: for example, this particular person's head is different from the other so they are different species of individuals. There is a long list of those differences: the skin color (*vaṇṇa*), hair form (*kesa*), the shape of the head (*sīsa*), the shape of the nose (*nāsa*), so on. The Buddha says that taking these into consideration there are people to think that there are differences among the human being. "It is not so!" the Buddha says. One man is not differentiated from another on any of this list. Taking the example of complexion such as different colors of white, brown, yellow and black, some people (anthropologist) have believed that there are different species of human being until recently. All of those assumptions, however, are withdrawn. Now all scientists agree that human beings are all equal (Homogeneous). The Buddha explains that **people's thought of different groups of human being by birth is just their imagination**. Actually there is no *jātimayaṃ lingaṃ* for human being.

**Only difference** that exists among the human being is the differences which would come up on the basis of the **livelihood**. According to the various Buddhist texts, each individual selected his own livelihood. There is a list of livelihood. Now one of the human being selects carpentry as his livelihood, then he is called carpenter. It does not mean that he is different from other person who selects other profession. When the humanity is taking into consideration, all are equal.

The Buddha said, "Vāsettha, one does not become a Brahmin by birth, one becomes Brahmin by what he does for his livelihood (***Na jaccā brāhmaṇo hoti na jaccā hoti abrahmaṇo kammanā brāhmaṇo hoti, kammanā hoti abrahmaṇo***).<sup>4</sup> The term *kammanā* means livelihood: teaching is the *kammanā* of the teacher; if the teacher does his teaching work properly, he becomes *brāhmaṇa* (a noble person), but if he does not work properly, he becomes *abrahmaṇā* (a lower person).

## (2) Anthropological Argument

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<sup>4</sup> The meaning of this stanza is that "one becomes brāhmaṇa based on livelihood, and one become non-brāhmaṇa based on livelihood)." Here the term ***kammanā*** means **livelihood**, not a normal meaning of action. In the various texts, the term uses to indicate "industries," that is the livelihood. But Jayavickrama translates it as "deed." See N.A. Jayavickrama trans. *Suttanipāṭa* (Sri Lanka: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, 2001), 251.

According to **Aggañña Sutta**, in the primitive society the people were all equal (*sadisānaṃ no asadisānaṃ*) and later on the various social groups emerged on the principle of dhamma; everything took place through the righteous order (*dhammeneva no adhammeno*). This is called an anthropological argument.

### **(3) Social Argument**

According to **Assalāyana Sutta**, there is no absolute or universal value of the Brahmin caste system because the caste of the Brahmins is a particular phenomena of the northern India. It does not exist even in the southern part of India. Furthermore, in other countries outside of India, there are various other social orders. The Buddha says that in the countries like Yona and Kamboja there are only two social classes: *ayya* (lords) and *dāsa* (serfs); each individual can become one of those social states. It is not an unchangeable class. The four caste system of the Brahmins, therefore, has no absolute value.

### **(4) Legal Argument**

According to **Madhura Sutta**, when a person infringes the law, he should get the punishment by the law not by taking care of his caste. The law should be applied to individuals without thinking their social status. Everybody should be equal in front of the law: we don't call a thief as Brahmin thief or a robber as Shudra robber.

### **(5) Moral Argument**

This argument is also found in the **Madhura Sutta**. Accordingly the theory of Kamma, it operates equally to all individuals of the different social castes.

### **(6) Ethical Argument**

According to **Saniti Sutta**, in the society people are divided into two groups: good people (*sukkābhijātika*) and bad people (*kanhābhijātika*). The Buddha says that human nature cannot be identified with good or bad: good person can become bad and bad person can become good; it depends on the behavior of each individual. In this ethical sense, all are also equal; cannot be judged by social caste.

### **(7) Spiritual (Religious) Argument**

According to **Kannakatthalaka Sutta**, all men and women are equal in terms of their potentiality to reach the ultimate spiritual goal.

## **3. Diversity of Human Being: the Ethnic Identity**

We have glanced over the several arguments of the Buddhism on the oneness of humankind. If you want to go for the detailed discussion, you would better to read the book titled "Buddhism and the Race Question."<sup>5</sup> Although there is no doubt of this book regarding as an excellent achievement, I think the authors missed some important points of the Suttas which assist the ethnic diversity of humankind. The authors missed them because they seemed to be too much absorbed in their arguments of human equality against the caste system. Now I would like to remark some evidences in different discourses of the Suttas which support the human diversity and different ethnic identities. The most obvious evidence can be found in the usage of the term **jāti**: this word is used in the discourses indicating three different meanings as follows:

### **(1) Jāti in the sense of caste**

In the discourse of the Sutta, the term **brāhmaṇa jāti** means *varṇa* which indicates the Brahmin caste.

### **(2) Jāti in the sense of birth and ethnicity**

As we know, the general meaning of *jāti* is indicating "birth": it is described as one of the suffering (*dukkha*) states in the Buddhist discourses; as a result, the term got a doctrinal significance so that other senses of the term have often been neglected. In the discourses, however, *jāti* is also used for indicating ethnics:<sup>6</sup>

#### **(a) Ambattha Sutta in Dīghanikāya**

When a Brahmin met the Buddha, he criticized people in Kapilavastu using the term *Śākya-jāti*. In response to him, the Buddha used the same term (*Śākya-jāti*) mentioned of the history of Śākya ethnics; he said that all the ethnic groups have peculiar fear of fragmentation (*jāti-sampadabaya*).

#### **(b) Pabbajjā Sutta in Suttanipāṭa**

When the king Bimbisāra asked which ethnic do you come from (*jātiṇakkhāhi pucchito*), the Buddha answered, "I come from the ethnic group of Śākya" (***Śākiyā nāma jātiyā***). Thus the Buddha identified himself as an ethnic Śākya clan.

#### **(c) Dhammacetiya Sutta in Majjhimanikāya**

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<sup>5</sup> G. P. Malalasekera and K. N. Jayatilleka, *Buddhism and the Race Question*, Unesco, Paris: Unesco, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. there were emerging 16 nations and 10 clans in the Gangetic valley; there were no homogeneous Sanskrit Vedic culture and the four caste system which were already prevailed in the Indus valley. The emerging nation states were known as ethnic behavior of the inhabitants: for example, Kapilavastu is the country in which Śākya people live; Kośala is the country of Kośala ethnic. This multiplicity of ethnic groups in the Gangetic valley in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. overlooked the so called social order of the caste of Brahmins.

The term *Dhammacetiya* means “testimonies of the Dhamma.” It is the story of long discussion which took place between the king Pasenadi of Kosala and the Buddha. After giving a long homage to the Buddha, the king said, “The Blessed One is a Kosalan and I am a Kosalan (*bhagava pi kosalako aham pi kosalako*); the Blessed One is eighty years old and I am eighty years old.” Then soon after the king left, the Buddha addressed the bhikkhus thus: “the king Pasenadi uttered monuments to the Dhamma. You must learn (*uggaṇhātha*) them, master (*pariyāpuṇātha*) them, remember (*dhāretha*) them; the monuments to the Dhamma are meaningful (*atthasaṃhitāni*) and lead to the final goal (*ādiḥbrahmacariyakānīti*).<sup>7</sup>

These cases of the usage of the term *jāti* in the sense of **ethnicity** clearly manifest that the Buddha recognized the diverse ethnic identity.

According to Tika-nipāta in Aṅguttara-nikāya, there are three categories of defilements:

- (a) **Gross defilements** (*olarikā upakkilesā*): unwholesome acts, words, and thoughts which manifest themselves so that we can immediately recognize them. These defilements are in manifestation level (*vīṭikkama*).
- (b) **Medium defilements** (*majjhimikā upakkilesā*): sensual thoughts, angry thoughts, and violent thoughts which are called *micchā-saṅkappa* opposite to *sammā-saṅkappa*. They are not so easy to get rid of because they operate within the human mind so that others cannot recognize them. These defilements are in arising level (*pariyuthāna*).
- (c) **Subtle defilements** (*sukhumā upakkilesā*): *jāti* (ethnic), *janapada* (inhabited country), and *avaññatti* (arrogant attachment to one’s own mind). These are the most inner characters which only Arahants can eradicate. These defilements are in dormant level (*anusaya*).
- (d)

### (3) *Jāti* in the sense of species identity

As we examined before, in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* the Buddha use the word *jāti* as the meaning of **species**: “I will explain to you, oh Vāseṭṭha, in due order as it really is, the classification of the **species of living things** (*jātivibhaigaṃ pāṇānaṃ*), for mutually discrete are **the various species** (*aññaṃañña hi jātiyo*)<sup>8</sup>. The authors of the book “Buddhism and the Race Question” emphasize this meaning of *jāti* with its continuing discussion of the oneness and equality of humankind in order to prove the wrong view of the caste theory. However, it is the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* itself that gives us various other categories of human beings: even though all men are equal biologically, they are different by **various occupations**; the Sutta does not deny the **diverse ethnic identity** either. According to the Buddha, **the nations are**

<sup>7</sup> According to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the term *dhammacetiyaṇi* “monuments to the Dhamma” means words expressing reverence to the Dhamma. But prof. Oliver translates it as “testimony of the Dhamma.” The term *atthasaṃhitāni* is translated as “beneficial” and by the Bodhi, *ādiḥbrahmacariyakānīti* as “they belong to the fundamentals of the holy life” by the Bodhi. See Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: Majjhima Nikāya*, (Massachusetts, USA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 733 and 1295.

<sup>8</sup> N.A. Jayawickrama trans. *Suttanipāta* (Sri Lanka: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, 2001), 242.

**differed** by three factors: geographical **territory**, diverse **language**<sup>9</sup>, and inherited **culture**. Those differences are found among the human beings.

The Buddha, therefore, did not deny the diversity of humankind while insisting the oneness and equality of human beings. On the one hand, the book is a marvelous work that persuasively argues against caste theory and racial discrimination; but on the other hand, it is defective in the balanced quotation of the discourses regarding the different ethnic identity of humankind.

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<sup>9</sup> It is well known story that the Buddha denied the request of two bhikkhus who came from the Brahmin caste: they insisted that the Dhamma could be polluted by using different dialects; but the Buddha did not accept their request of using one holy language, Sanskrit, as the Brahmanism did.